

# What Is a Speech Community?

## Why Should Teachers Care?

Annela Teemant & Stefinee E. Pinnegar

### Vernacular

*What is vernacular?*

A speech community is a group of people who share rules for conducting and interpreting at least one variety of a language or dialect. The term can be applied to a neighborhood, a city, a region or a nation. We all belong to at least one speech community. The earliest speech community we belong to is the one we share with our primary caregivers (usually our parents) and is the basis for some of the most intimate and long term relationships we form across our life. The rules and norms of this speech community show up in a dialect referred to as the vernacular, the most basic variety or dialect of language we command. Our vernacular speech is least susceptible to monitoring and least likely to change across our lifetime.

Most of us were immersed in language from our first awareness of the world around us. Since infants can hear the sound of their mother's voice and the noises and interactions in her environment in the womb, we probably hear our first sounds before we take our first breath. Fairly early in our development, we target in our babbling those sounds that form the phonology of our language or dialect. In interaction with us, our mother adjusts her speech to reflect the phonology, morphology, semantic and syntactic relationships that we are learning. Indeed, our vernacular speech forms the very basis of all future linguistic interaction and development. Across our lifetime we will participate in, construct, engage in, and possibly abandon many speech communities. No other will be as primary.

### Identity and Vernacular Connection

*How are identity and vernacular connected?*

Our vernacular speech is the language of this earliest communication. Through this community, we are introduced to our culture, our heritage, and the ways of being that are important in our development as a member of the human community. It forms the basis of our adult identity. That is why vernacular speech is often called our mother tongue. It is the form of speech spoken to us by our mothers, and it is the mother of (the basis of) the development of other forms of speech.

Our next speech community involves our neighborhood and the larger extended family. Unless we were reared in multi or bilingual communities and neighborhoods, the norms of our vernacular speech community and other early speech

communities are not that different from each other. In fact, the first contrast probably occurs when we begin to participate in religion or school. Both of these communities involve regular, face-to-face interaction between us and a larger group of people who may or may not share vernacular speech similar to our own.

## Home and School

*What may be sources of a conflict in one's identity, particularly when children enter school?*

When we enter school we bring more than the pronunciation patterns, lexicon, syntactic structures, semantic and interpretive frameworks of the language variation or dialect we speak. We have begun to learn to whom we should say what and when. Furthermore, we have learned rules of conversation and linguistic interaction. We have learned to identify whose turn it is to speak, how to get the floor ourselves, and when a person's turn is over. All of these linguistic skills support us in our first steps toward the development of literacy. When the patterns of the speech communities we join at school are not that much different from the discourse patterns of the speech community (or communities) we participate in with our parents, literary development is more natural and easier.

When the linguistic heritage we bring to school contrasts sharply with the norms of the speech community of the school, it creates difficulties not just for speaking but for participating. If our linguistic heritage is viewed as problematic, divergent, or substandard, we may think of ourselves as problems. We may feel shame for who we are and the community we come from. If how we speak, gain access to participation, interpret behavior, or respond politely is misunderstood by the school as laziness, recalcitrance, disrespectfulness, or stupidity, our entire educational future and our ability to achieve our intellectual potential may be called into question.

Linguistic heritage that is suspect usually comes from those who either speak a different language or use dialects judged to be non-standard. John Ogbu points out that just because people speak a different language or dialect does not mean they will not do well in learning a new language and in achieving success in a new culture. But in the United States as well as other countries in the world, some groups do better in this process than others. Some point to cultural patterns to account for differences in successful participation. Yet, as we look at different immigrant groups we find this may or may not be true. For example, people often suggest that the reason Puerto Ricans have not done well in American schools is because of differences in eye contact in their culture compared to the dominant or majority culture of the United States. However, the Punjabi usually do very well in the United States even though they share similar cultural differences involving eye contact. Furthermore, immigrant Korean and Japanese students do equally well in the majority culture of the U.S., even though their cultural practices are quite different from ours. Ironically, Korean students in Japan whose families were brought there as forced labor do significantly worse than Japanese students, even though the cultures of Korea and Japan are much more alike than the cultures of the U.S. and Korea.

## Different Reactions

*How do voluntary vs. involuntary groups react?*

John Ogbu accounts for these discrepancies by pointing to the difference between voluntary and involuntary (or caste minority) groups. Voluntary immigrants are those who came willingly to this country. They expect to learn a new language and find ways to gain access to and participate in a new culture. Therefore, while the speech community they meet at school is different from their own, they expect to be able to use the vernacular speech they brought with them as the basis from which their new language will emerge. For voluntary immigrants, learning the new language and participating in this new speech community is, in the long run, viewed as a positive and exhilarating experience. Voluntary immigrants plan to add this new language and culture to their repertoire of language styles. They expect to participate in additive bilingualism.

Involuntary immigrants (caste minorities) come into a country against their will, or they represent caste minorities like the forced labor Koreans in Japan and the African Americans in this country. They are also represented by groups of

conquered and oppressed people within a country, like Native American groups. In the foundations course we discussed resistance theory. After consistently experiencing rejection by the majority community, students sometimes become aggressive or belligerent toward or actively resist the majority culture. Involuntary immigrants respond in similar ways. Because of the response to their culture and language, these immigrants have developed cultural practices which have emerged either in response to their rejection by the majority culture or have been interpreted by the minority group as resistance toward the majority culture. In order to become part of the majority discourse community, involuntary immigrants feel they will have to give up their own culture and practice subtractive bilingualism. However, when individual members of the community have rejected the language of their speech community, this has not guaranteed their success in the dominant culture.

## Language Choice

*How do identity and culture formation/crisis translate to an individual's choice of language(s) and attitudes toward culture(s)?*

Involuntary immigrants and caste minorities may feel that they have to give up their vernacular, a vital and central part of their identity, to participate in the speech community of the schools. Caste minorities usually have a shared heritage of rejection by majority institutions. Parents and grandparents may have tried to participate in the discourse of schools and been rejected by those institutions. Therefore, while they recognize the power of the majority culture, they may not be willing or able to support their children in engaging successfully with school speech communities.

Most of us either now or in the past have participated in many speech communities. There is the speech community of our religious affiliations, our occupations or careers, our neighborhood, and our families. As adolescents, we all learned a new language consisting of the register of adolescents. We developed new words for old concepts. We shared language and interaction patterns with our peers that marked us as distinct from the adult culture we would one day join. What we learned as we participated in speech communities was that just because we use the correct language, have the right clothes, and use the right moves, doesn't mean we will be able to command the discourse of the speech community. In fact, we might still be rejected by it.

When we don't feel comfortable in a particular speech community, we may adopt strategies like silence, avoidance, or other social practices that protect us from what we perceive may result in public rejection.

Usually, we move easily and fluidly from one speech community to another. We are in the situation—the family reunion, the class reunion, the Sunday School class, and the grocery store—and we simply use the language and social interaction patterns that come to us. Only when we are uncertain of our ability to reproduce the linguistic and social norms appropriate for the community do we become uncomfortable. William Labov pointed out that teachers usually come from white lower-middle-class backgrounds. In the process of becoming educated as teachers, they have crossed the boundary into a different class. As a result, they are hypersensitive to the norms that govern academic discourse communities. This hypersensitivity results in their hypercorrection of the speech of their own students.

## Classroom Rules and Power Relations

*How do they influence classroom interactions and academic achievement?*

As teachers, we often forget that we have authority and power in our classrooms. For the most part, we can decide what kinds of social interaction and linguistic styles, registers and patterns will be acceptable in our classrooms. We can create classrooms that have rigid performance standards rather than classrooms that are places for students to gain experience in learning the culture and linguistic practices of academic discourse. Instead of creating a speech community where all are not just welcomed, but the culture and language they bring is valued and respected, we create communities of exclusion. Research shows that children who can command participation in the widest range of academic discourse communities are those who will be most successful. It also shows that the best predictor of

academic achievement is the home background of the child. What this implies is that for most children, schools are not environments for learning and developing skill and potential but a great sorting ground where they are constantly tested and evaluated on what they already know and can do.

Teachers can also be so non-judgmental and inclusive they send false messages to their students. My own daughter once said to me, "My teacher says it doesn't matter if I can add and subtract. What matters is that I feel good about what I can do." While I want my daughter to have a strong self-concept, it does indeed matter for her long-term success whether she can command the language of mathematics with precision and accuracy. Thus, as Lisa Delpit points out, teachers may disenfranchise students if they pretend that whatever they bring is enough and if they do not help students from minority and culturally diverse backgrounds to position themselves to command the academic discourses that lead to future success.

## Impact on Identity and Development

*How do classroom rules impact our students, their identity, and their development?*

Teachers need to create classroom communities that not only embrace diversity, but school students in discourse practices allowing and encouraging them to become bidialectal, bilingual, and bicultural and support their identity. We can do this by teaching students the rules of speech communities, by helping them understand differences in the vernacular language they bring to schools and the language of schools—not in ways that discredit their language and cultural heritage but in ways that support its value and complexity.

Teachers belong to many speech communities. More importantly, every year they have the opportunity to co-construct a new speech community. Each year they have a new opportunity to engage students in ways that guarantee them ongoing access to their vernacular speech and primary culture and also give them access to the majority discourse of schools.

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